



Pleasure and the New Spanish Mentality: A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar

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"aesthetic ethos" of the sixties, a theoretical position that validated the realm of the creative imagination independent of quotidian (and frequently neglected) efforts toward mass base-building: "... the development of the productive forces beyond their capitalist organization suggests the possibility of freedom *within* the realm of necessity. The quantitative reduction of necessary labor could turn into quality (freedom) ... But the construction of such a society presupposes a type of man with a different sensitivity as

well as consciousness: men who would speak a different language, have different gestures, follow different impulses ... The imagination of such men and women would fashion their reason and tend to make the process of production a process of creation." Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 21. 23. Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60's," in *The 60's Without Apology*, 208-209.

MARSHA KINDER

Pleasure and the New Spanish Mentality:

A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar*

Following the enthusiastic critical reception of Pedro Almodóvar's *La Ley del Deseo* (*The Law of Desire*) at this year's Berlin Film Festival, Spain's oldest and largest-circulation film journal, *Fotogramas & Video*, ran an editorial saying:

"The recent Berlin Festival has demonstrated an important fact for Spanish cinema: the interest that our cinema can arouse abroad, not only at the level of interchange or cultural curiosity, but as an exportable and commercially valid product. ... Spanish cinema is trying to leave the national 'ghetto' and join a movement that proclaims the necessity and urgency of a 'European cinema' which transcends nationalities without renouncing their specificity."¹

Although this editorial mentions several films at the festival to support its point, it focuses most specifically on "the enormous and overwhelming success of *La Ley del Deseo*. ... a film that is eminently 'Spanish' but comprehensible to any person," and which confirms that "when one makes a cinema that has something to say, these things can have appeal everywhere."

Fotogramas fails to acknowledge the irony that this film being singled out as a model of "universal" appeal is an outrageous melodrama

featuring homosexual and transsexual protagonists in a sado-masochistic triangle involving incest, murder, and suicide and including several sexually explicit homoerotic love scenes. It's a film that in most national contexts would be marginal, to say the least. And yet in March, when it was screened in New York, concurrent with but not as part of the Ministry of Culture's Third Annual Spanish Film Week (which included an equally extreme Almodóvar melodrama called *Matador*), *La Ley del Deseo* again received critical raves in the *Village Voice* and in the *New Yorker* where Pauline Kael devoted a full page to the film—an achievement that was duly reported as "news" in Spain's most prestigious daily, *El País*.²

At the very moment when Spanish cinema may be facing its most serious economic crisis, Almodóvar's films are achieving modest success both at home and abroad. Since the death of Franco in 1975 and despite the earnest efforts of the Socialist government which came to power in 1982, Spanish films have not only failed to find adequate distribution in foreign markets, but they have steadily been losing their home audience. Spanish spectators are either staying home in droves with their VCRs or flocking to see the latest imports which increasingly dominate Spanish movie houses with their block booking. The number of total spectators who attended movies in Spain decreased from

*This conversation took place on May 25, 1987 at Pedro Almodóvar's piso in Madrid. It was made possible by a research grant from the Comité Conjunto Hispano Norteamericano para la Cooperación Cultural y Educativa.



Pedro Almodóvar at work

331 million in 1970 to 101 million in 1985, and by 1985 Spanish films held only 17.5% of that diminishing home market, as opposed to 30% in 1970.³ Within this discouraging context, Almodóvar's early features did surprisingly well in Spain and *Matador* was an outstanding success—the third-largest-grossing Spanish film in 1986.⁴ The final figures are not yet in on *La Ley del Deseo*, but they promise to be even better. It's the first Almodóvar film to be immediately sold worldwide—virtually everywhere but in Japan.

Almodóvar's films have a curious way of resisting marginalization. Never limiting himself to a single protagonist, he chooses an ensemble of homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, doper, punk, terrorist characters who refuse to be ghettoized into divisive subcultures because they are figured as part of the "new Spanish mentality"—a fast-paced revolt that relentlessly pursues pleasure rather than power, and a post-modern erasure of all repressive boundaries and taboos associated with Spain's medieval, fascist, and modernist heritage. Almodóvar claims:

"I always try to choose prototypes and characters from modern-day Madrid, who are somehow representative of a certain mentality existing today. . . . I think that since Franco died new

generations have been coming to the fore, generations that are unrelated to former ones, that are even unrelated to the 'progressive' generations that appeared during the last years of the dictatorship. How do people 20 years old live in Madrid? It's quite complex. . . . The characters in my films utterly break with the past, which is to say that most of them, for example, are apolitical. Pleasure must be grasped immediately, hedonistically; that is almost the main leitmotif of their lives."⁵

This new mentality was already present in Almodóvar's first low-budget, underground feature (made in 16mm and blown up to 35), *Pepi, Lucy, Bom y Otros Chicas del Montón* (retitled in English *Pepi, Lucy, Bom and Other Girls All Like Mom*, 1980), where a policeman, who's married to middle-aged Lucy, rapes their young neighbor Pepi and tries to cover up his crime by planting marijuana on her balcony. Lucy responds by becoming sexually involved with a girl even younger than Pepi, a 16-year-old pleasure lover named Bom, and Pepi writes their love story. The rape is further avenged by Pepi's friends from a punk rock group who, in order to attract the rapist, disguise themselves as traditional Spanish zarzuela singers.

The new mentality of 20-year-olds was seen even more clearly in Almodóvar's second splashy feature *Laberinto de Pasiones* (*Labyrinth of Passions*, 1982), which positively bristles with vibrant color and a wildly comic sexual energy. The tortuously complex plot follows the tangled passions of an ensemble of young Madrileños trying to escape the crippling influences of repressive fathers in order to pursue their own pleasure. Riza Niro (Imanol Arias) is the bisexual son of the deposed "emperor of Tehran." More interested in sex and cosmetics than in family or politics, he flees his corrupt, cancerous father and lecherous, infertile stepmother, becomes a punk singer in Madrid, and ultimately flies away with the Felliniesque Sexilia (Celia Roth), a nymphomaniac member of a feminist punk band called "Las Ex" and daughter of a world-class sex-loathing gynecologist, whose scientific detachment drives his daughter to promiscuity. Queti, a young laundress who is chronically raped by her dry-cleaning daddy on alternate days, undergoes plastic surgery to become Sexilia's surrogate on stage and at home where she enters a budding incestuous relationship with her new doctor daddy. This two-faced incestuous daughter feeds both daddies powerful potions that render

*The final
embrace
of the
erotic
killers
in
MATADOR*



one impotent, the other horny. The fleeing lovers Riza and Sexy are hotly pursued by an assortment of jealous punks and Islamic fundamentalists, but none so dogged as the super-keen-scented Sadec, a handsome Tehranian terrorist (played by Antonio Banderas) who also loves Riza in spite of politics. This “musical comedy” (for which Almodóvar himself wrote and performed some of the wildest songs) is still running on weekends as a midnight cult movie in Madrid.

Though I haven’t seen Almodóvar’s third feature, *Entre Tinieblas* (retitled in English *Sisters of Darkness*, 1983), it’s reported to be about a community of nuns known as the “Humble Redeemers” who run a home for delinquent girls, where, among other pleasurable pastimes, the sisters keep a pet tiger, write steamy best-sellers, smoke pot, and shoot dope.

¿Qué He Hecho Yo para Merecer Ésto? (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, 1984/85), Almodóvar’s first international hit, follows the travails of Gloria (Carmen Maura), a high-rise suburban housewife who toils as a maid to help support her family, which includes: a taxi-driver husband who’s obsessed with a suicidal German singer and who gets involved in a plot to forge Hitler’s memoirs; two sons—a teenage heroin dealer and a 12-year-old homosexual; and a dotty mother-in-law who yearns for her pet lizard and her home village. Despite these pressures, both the

soapish heroine and her narrative still have time for needy neighbors—a cheerful hooker who longs to go to Las Vegas and a haughty mother who abuses her telekinetic child. Ultimately, downtrodden Gloria kills her troublesome husband, her dooper son goes to live with his granny in her home village, and her homosexual prodigal son returns home from the lecherous dentist who “adopted” him just in time to save his despondent mother from suicide.

Matador (1985/86) is an exercise in excess, a stylish psychological thriller with extravagant costumes, lush visuals, and the narrative logic of erotic fantasy. It opens with a montage of violence against women, movie images being watched on a VCR by an ex-matador as he masturbates. Having been gored in the ring, Diego Montes (Nacho Martínez) now only *teaches* bullfighting, but to recapture the ecstasy of the kill, he murders young girls. Angered by the insinuation that he might be a repressed homosexual, Angel (Antonio Banderas), one of Diego’s virginal students, tries to rape his next door neighbor Eva, who conveniently (for the Oedipal subtext) just happens to be Diego’s young fashion-model mistress. Angel is sexually disturbed, not only by an evil repressive mother who belongs to Opus Dei (an extreme rightwing lay religious organization), but also by a supernatural ability to see the violent and erotic acts of others and to imagine they are his own. Not only does he see the serial murders of his men-



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tor Diego, but also those of his famous female defense lawyer María Cardenal, a beautiful man-killer, with a secret obsession with matadors, which she picked up while watching Diego being gored. Once Diego and María meet in a movie house during the lust-in-the-dust climax of *Duel in the Sun*, these erotic killers see their destiny and give up all other pursuits. Guiding a group of interested parties—Diego’s discarded mistress Eva, the maternal psychiatrist (Carmen Maura) who gives Angel loving support, and the police inspector (Eusebio Poncela) who has eyes for Angel and other young men in tight matador pants—Angel and company try to forestall the final fatal orgasm of Diego and María, but they arrive in time only to witness with envy the blissful smiles of the dead lovers.

La Ley del Deseo (1986) is another psychological thriller of excess, but this time about two brothers, Pablo and Tina. Pablo (Eusebio Poncela) is a homosexual screenwriter/director who is in love with a young bisexual named Juan (Miguel Molina) and who rewrites Juan’s love letters to make them suit his own standard of absolute passion. One of his soft-core films deeply arouses a young spectator named Antonio (Antonio Banderas), who subsequently has his first homosexual experience with Pablo and immediately is transformed into a possessive lover. When Antonio reads the love letter from Juan that was actually written by Pablo, he becomes insanely jealous and murders his rival. Stunned by grief over Juan’s murder, Pablo has a car accident and suffers amnesia. Pablo’s brother Tina, formerly Tino (brilliantly played by Carmen Maura), is a transsexual actress who loved and was abandoned by her father and who now hates men. The lesbian model she lives with (ironically played by real-life trans-

sexual Bibi Andersen) has deserted both Tina and her own 10-year-old daughter Ada, who now adopts Tina as her mother and falls in love with Pablo. In order to force Pablo to see him after the murder, Antonio seduces Tina and then holds her hostage, so that he will be granted a final hour of love. Although Pablo goes to the assignation with hatred and dread, his feelings are miraculously transformed into love by the purity of Antonio’s passion.

Born in 1949 in the small village of Calzada de Calatrava near Ciudad Real, Almodóvar claims he always felt “like an astronaut in the court of King Arthur” and “knew he was born to take on the big cities.” By the time he was eight, this quixotic child was living in La Mancha and then in Cáceres, where he studied with the Salesianos and Franciscans and finished his baccalaureate. In 1967, at 17, he finally made it to Madrid where he immediately became a hippy and then a white-collar worker at the National Telephone Company. After hours, he became a versatile member of Madrid’s artistic underground—doing comic strips for underground magazines; acting in the avant-garde theater group *Los Golliardos*; recording and performing live in a rock band called Almodóvar and McNamara; publishing journalistic articles, parodic memoirs (under the pen name Patty Diphusa), a porno photo-story, and a novella; and making experimental short films, first in 8mm and then in 16. Even after making his first feature in 1980, he still continued writing and singing. But by the time he made *Entre Tinieblas* in 1983, his first film to be sent to a foreign festival and sold outside of Spain, he was launched as an international auteur.

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What do you think is the primary appeal of your films, especially of La Ley del Deseo which has had such international success, whereas most Spanish films have had such difficulty in getting international distribution?

Well, I’ve been striving for this over the last three years, and I think this is the fruit of my previous work. People know me more now, and it’s easier for me to sell a film. On the other hand, I think my films are very contemporary. They represent more than others, I suppose, the new Spain, this kind of new mentality that appears in Spain after Franco dies. Above all, after 1977 till now. Stories about the new Spain

have appeared in the mass media of every country. Everybody has heard that now everything is different in Spain, that it has changed a lot, but it is not so easy to find this change in the Spanish cinema. I think in my films they see how Spain has changed, above all, because now it is possible to do this kind of film here. Not that a film like *The Law of Desire* would be impossible to make in places like Germany, London or the United States.

Yes, but it would be impossible to have such a film get half of its financing from the ministry of culture in any of those countries! How would you define "the new Spanish mentality"?

I believe that the new Spanish mentality is less dramatic—although I demonstrate the contrary in my films. We have consciously left behind many prejudices, and we have humanized our problems. We have lost the fear of earthly power (the police) and of celestial power (the church), and we have also lost our provincial certainty that we are superior to the rest of the world—that typical Latin prepotency. And we have recuperated the inclination toward sensuality, something typically Mediterranean. We have become more skeptical, without losing the joy of living. We don't have confidence in the future, but we are constructing a past for ourselves because we don't like the one we had.

Do you think that the appeal of your films also has something to do with their unique tone? I know that Pauline Kael in her very enthusiastic review of La Ley del Deseo stressed the uniqueness of the tone without really describing what it is.

Well, I would like to think this is one of the reasons because this is the main difference of my films. Whether they are good or bad, my films are absolutely different from other Spanish films and even from the other foreign cinema. I mean you can talk about a lot of influences, everybody has them. But if you see all of my films, I'm sure you can differentiate them from the others, you can recognize them. I would like to think this is the main reason for their international appeal.

How would you define that tone?

It's hard for me to talk about it because I never try to verbalize about my films, but it's true there is a different tone, even in general. This is something I'm obsessed with when I'm working with the actors. They have to say my lines in a different way. Even for me this is



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something that's very difficult to explain to them because you have to catch it and you have to feel it. When I'm shooting, I'm obsessed with creating an atmosphere that explains exactly what is my tone. The atmosphere that I create when I'm shooting, this is the tone of my films. To take one example, I used to mix all the genres. You can say my films are melodramas, tragicomedies, comedies or whatever because I used to put everything together and even change genre within the same sequence and very quickly. But the main difference is the private morality. I think one auteur is different from another because he has his own morality. When I say morality, I don't mean ethics, it's just a private point of view. I mean you can see a film by Luis Buñuel and you know exactly that it belongs to Buñuel because it's just the way of thinking.

It seems to me that what lies at the center of your unique tone is what you were describing before, that fluidity with which you move so quickly from one genre to another, or from one feeling or tone to another, so that when a line is delivered, it's very funny and borders on parody and we spectators are just ready to laugh, but at the same time it's erotic and moves us emotionally. In this way, you always demonstrate that you're in control, that you're manipulating the spectator response.

Yes, it takes more care than other styles of acting and shooting. You have to be very careful to control the tone because it can easily run away with you and go too far. Just as you say, in my films everything is just at the border of parody. It's not only parody. It's also the borderline of the ridiculous and of the grotesque. But it's easy to fall over the line.

Other film-makers who come to mind as doing something similar with tone are David Lynch . . .

Absolutely, I recognize myself a lot in *Blue Velvet*. I love it.

I love that film, too. It allows you to be both terrified and turned on and at the same time it's also hysterically funny. And then there's Fassbinder.

But the difference is that Fassbinder, as a German, doesn't have much of a sense of humor. In *Blue Velvet* you can find a great sense of humor, but *Blue Velvet* is more morbid than my films because there is always an element of naïveté in what I'm doing. It's strangely anti-theatrical because I'm not so naïve. But this kind of purity of actions, feelings and spontaneity, that's not in *Blue Velvet*. *Blue Velvet* is darker, sicker, sick in every way. But, with a lot of humor. Do you think there is humor in Fassbinder's films?

Oh yes, although it's always combined with pain.

German culture is so different from Spanish culture. In our culture there is a great sense of humor but not in the German culture. Also, I believe that our culture is more visceral. Intuition and imagination influence us more than reason. There is more adventure and spontaneity. We don't fear disorder or chaos.

Your use of Hollywood melodrama—especially in ¿Qué He Hecho? where two characters go to see Splendor in the Grass and in Matador where there's a long excerpt from Duel in the Sun—it seems similar to the ways in which Fassbinder used Sirk and even Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard in Veronika Voss, where he picked something already very extreme—and then pushed it even further to that borderline of parody. How do you see the relationship between your work and Hollywood melodrama?

All of the influences on me and all of the film references in my films are very spontaneous and visual. I don't make any tributes. I'm a very naïve spectator. I can't learn from the movies that I love. But if I had to choose one master or model, I would choose Billy Wilder. He represents exactly what I want to do.

Which Billy Wilder? His films are so varied!

Both Billy Wilders. The *Sunset Boulevard* Billy Wilder and *The Apartment* Billy Wilder, the 1-2-3 and *The Lost Weekend*. *The Lost Weekend*, for example, is a big, big drama but you can find a lot of humor in it and a lot of imagination in the way it develops a unique situation. It's a great challenge for a screenwriter. But to return to the question about Hollywood,

I just love that big period of the classic American melodrama. I'm not just talking about Sirk but about the kinds of films Bette Davis made. I like these extreme genres where you can talk naturally about strong sentiments without a sense of the ridiculous. This is something that melodrama has. But, of course, all these films like *Splendor in the Grass* and *Duel in the Sun*, which is so outrageous, I mean you have to be very very brave to dare to go to this kind of extreme, you can really be grotesque if you don't know how to do it. This is something that I like. But I use the genre in a different way. My films are not so conventional as that kind of melodrama. Because I don't respect the boundaries of the genre, I mix it with other things. So my films appear to be influenced by Hollywood melodrama, but I put in other elements that belong more to my culture. For example, *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* is more like a neorealist film than melodrama. I think it's more like the films of Rossellini, Zavattini, and DeSica—more like Italian neorealism which is also a melodramatic genre. But I put in a lot of humor. That makes the reality even more awful in a way, more extreme. And I also put in a lot of surrealistic elements that completely change the genre. I think that the presence of the nonrational in my films is strong, but I never try to explain it. For example, in *¿Qué He Hecho?* I don't try to explain the girl with the telekinetic powers, the girl like Carrie. I just put her in as part of the life or plot, and this kind of element changes the genre.

There's a moment in ¿Qué He Hecho? that helps me understand what you might mean by calling it a neorealist film. In one scene the older son asks for help with his homework in assigning the labels "realist" and "romantic" to famous authors, and his granny reverses the traditional answers, calling Byron a realist and Balzac a romantic. Isn't this joke a comment on your own style? Isn't this exactly what you're doing in this movie—reversing the traditional meanings of realist and romantic?

That could be, but I had no consciousness of it.

In one of your interviews, you say you admired very much the Spanish neorealism of Marco Ferreri and Fernando Fernán Gómez, films like El Pisito (1958), El Cochecito (1960) and La Vida por Delante (1958)—films that combined neorealism with a Spanish absurdist black humor called esperpento. In his new book

Out of the Past, John Hopewell says that *¿Qué He Hecho?* continues in this tradition.⁶ Is this connection valid?

Yes, very much so. If you have to find some source or relation to Spanish movies for my films, I think they are related to that kind of film. And also to an early film by Francisco Regueiro, *Duerme, Duerme, Mi Amor* (*Sleep, Sleep, My Love*, 1974). It's wonderful. Have you seen that film?

Yes, it's desperately funny, and I can definitely see the connections with the absurdist black humor and the high-rise living theme in *¿Qué He Hecho?*

Yes, this is one line I admire very much, and also early Belanga. For me Berlanga's *Plácido* (1961) is a model.

Is it the film's rapid pacing and its ensemble of comic characters that appeal to you?

Yes, and also this kind of tragic situation, very dark and very sad, but with great naturalness, and this kind of comedy that talks about a lot of things in life very seriously, and this kind of confusion of a lot of people all talking and doing different things at the same time.

Yes, I can see those qualities in your films, especially in *¿Qué He Hecho?* . . . I think one of the most amazing things about *¿Qué He Hecho?* is that whereas it starts out with distanced reflexivity (with Carmen Maura walking past a film crew as she goes to work as a maid in a martial arts gym) and with burlesque (when she mimics their swordmoves with her broom and has a torrid sexual encounter with a man in a shower who proves to be impotent), still amidst all of the satiric absurdities Maura's performance miraculously remains so realistic that she still manages to generate emotional identification in the spectator. And this has a big payoff in the final sequence when she is saved from suicide by the homecoming of her homosexual son who has just walked out on the lecherous dentist his mother left him with in order to cover the dental bill. We still get a big emotional rush from their reunion, and we're marvelling, how did Almodóvar manage to pull this off!

Yes, I tried to do that. This is always the challenge that I face whenever I make a film. . . . I try to solve the problem of how to get the big emotion from the audience, how to get emotional identification with the problem (in this case, high-rise apartment living) which lies behind the facade of absurdity, because everything just under the facade is absolutely real.



The downtrodden Gloria stands behind her neighbor hooker and dotty mother-in-law: *¿QUE HE HECHO PARA MERECEER TODO ESTO?*

And I think the audience can always recognize very clearly what I'm trying to say about life in the high-rise. And the jokes have many reasons for being there. For example, the opening titles sequence is very much like an abstract or experimental film with all the crew there making a film while the female protagonist goes to work in that place. That was the square where we were shooting; it was very direct. And in the gym where they're doing kendo, it looks like parody, but it also shows a very aggressive sport—one that releases aggression. And from the beginning you see that she's going to be in a male world and that males are the violent, strong ones who do this kind of thing. And she is just cleaning up. And then she tries to imitate them, just to be more quiet.

It also prepares her for killing her husband with an oxbone.

It's just the surface that's surrealistic, but I think you can understand very well what's just behind that surface. But I always try to work with all of these elements and to make it so that

Murderous matador confronts man-killing lawyer: *MATADOR*



the people can feel it. Another example is the big confession scene in *The Law of Desire* when Carmen Maura, as Tina the transsexual, is trying to tell her brother Pablo about her relationship with their father. You know this is really hard. It's very strange, it's not easy to find a girl like that. Well, but I hope, and I felt that during this speech the audience really identifies with Tina as if she were the girl next door, someone with whom they can readily identify. I mean this is really *heavy*. She committed incest and she changed her sex to be with her father. She's one in a million. In this case, the acting is very important. It's Carmen Maura. If she hadn't been so perfect, then you never could have believed it. To do this kind of thing, you have to be very very careful. But if you succeed with that, then the audience can believe and understand everything.

Even within that scene, you seem to purposely make it even harder for yourself, I mean in the way you set it up with her brother's amnesia, which is a highly contrived and corny way of motivating why Tina has to tell him and the audience about her past at this particular moment. And then that comical touch when she mentions Madrid, and then points out the window, saying, Oh yes, this is Madrid! reminding herself and us of the amnesia. And even with these absurdities, we are still swept away by Maura's performance.

Yes, in that scene even Carmen was very surprised because she told me that when I was directing her, I asked her for exactly the opposite of what she thought was right for this scene. She was sure that everyone else would have asked her to do exactly the contrary of what I said. Because the confession was very quiet, not very dramatic. So perhaps that's why you can believe it better. I don't know.

There seems to be a movement in La Ley del Deseo that is parallel to the one in ¿Qué He Hecho?, where you start with reflexivity, in this case a film within a film, in which someone dictates from a script how a young man is to masturbate, and a voyeuristic spectator who—

Imitates what he sees, yes. . . .

In a way, you start out by demystifying how movies work, but then by the end of the film those same dynamics still work on the audience very powerfully. A film-maker like Buñuel, in showing you how it happens, prevents you from experiencing that kind of pleasure—he

offers you a different kind of pleasure. But you demonstrate how the pleasure works and then make the spectator experience it despite the demonstration.

Yes, that's true.

My favorite moment in La Ley is when all the people at the end—Tina, the little girl Ada, and the police—look up with wonder at the window of the apartment where Pablo and his murderous lover Antonio are having their final hour of passionate love.

Yes, this is one of the moments I'm proudest of—it's like a ritual with the music. I told the cinematographer (Angel Luis Fernández), make it surprising and magical—not exactly like real magic, but like that moment when everyone looks up at the UFOs in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I like it very much.

It's wonderful. Their faces are full of awe and envy. Even the police are softened and eroticized by the passion they imagine is going on inside that room. They become the quintessential Almodóvar spectators! Isn't this the third time such a spectatorial moment occurs in the film? The first is the opening where Antonio is watching and is turned on by the erotic scene from Pablo's movie. And the second occurs in the middle of the film where Tina asks a man in the street to hose her down while her brother Pablo and the child Ada watch in wonder. Isn't the film's structure controlled by these three spectatorial moments?

Yes, all three moments you have mentioned are the key to the film. The beginning is the key to understanding everything. I try to put the spectator into the field that I'm going to explore—the field of desire. Everyone understands that you can pay someone to make love to you. But it's very difficult to recognize that you can pay someone just to *listen* to his desire, which is something very different. This sensual desire is more abstract. It's just the necessity of feeling desire in an absolute way. This is the problem in the film. And also, as you said, I explain how the movie is made. You see just the interior of the movie. But also I explain the director's behavior—the relationship between director and actor. The director, on the one hand, is a voyeur, but he also is pushing, dictating exactly what he wants to be enacted, he wants to be represented, and this is very important to the relationship of power and voyeurism between the director and the actor.

And yet aren't both being controlled by the script, which is probably why the script and the typewriter become so essential in the film—with all those huge close-ups and expressionistic angles of the keyboard? I read in one interview where you say the force of Pablo's imagination is stronger than his feelings and that's why he takes the vengeance on the typewriter—why he refuses to write another script and why he throws the typewriter out the window at the end. But couldn't you also say that the script links Pablo to patriarchal discourse?

I don't understand.

Isn't Pablo like his father—a seducer who prefers young boys and who's never totally committed? Doesn't he reenact his father's seduction of his brother and also inspire his lovers to make a sacrifice? Pablo may want to be in control, but isn't he as shaped by his father as Tina was? Aren't his scripts and movies vehicles for patriarchal ideology?

Well, I didn't think of that. Those are new ideas to me, but I agree with them and find them interesting. I like to discover new explanations in my films. It makes them richer. The opening is the main sequence of desire, of abstract desire rather than of sensual pleasure. Sensuality and physical pleasure are far better represented in the central sequence where Tina says, "Hose me!" than in the opening where the boy says, "Fuck me!" That's an important distinction in the film.

*But isn't there submission in both? Aren't they both part of the same masochistic aesthetic that also leads you to put the lust-in-the-dust ending of *Duel in the Sun* in the middle of *Matador*?*

I don't see it as masochism. Masochism requires pain, and I don't find it in my films . . . I don't see masochism even in the Carmen Maura figure Tina, who is so obsessed with her past. She doesn't want to forget anything, even her worst memories. She's very engaged with her worst memories, they even feed her. This can be masochism too . . . a kind of quotidian masochism. In life in general you have to accept pain. It's a kind of adventure and sometimes pain is the price you have to pay; the things you get are more important than the pain. But masochism requires that you like to feel pain. . . . No, my films are more about pleasure, sensuality, and living—about the celebration of living. Don't forget you have



*Angel and company try to forestall the final fatal orgasm in *MATADOR**

to be conscious that for this celebration of absolute pleasure, often you have to pay a very high price. But the price is parallel with the pleasure. This is the theory of *Matador*. If you can find an absolute pleasure, you also have to pay an absolute price. And in the reference to *Duel in the Sun*, there is, of course, what you said, but what was more important for me in this scene is just that when the ex-matador and lawyer come to the cinema, they look at the screen and see their future. It's like when you look into a magic crystal ball. When you go to the cinema, the cinema reflects not your life but your end. And it was exactly the ending of *Duel in the Sun* that is the ending of *Matador*.

*But then both in *Matador* and *La Ley*, watching movies seems to be a very dangerous activity.*

No, the problem is that *your* mentality is far more rational than ours, than of the Spanish people. And perhaps all of these terrible things are here inside my films. But I don't see these elements so clearly. I'm unconscious of them. I don't want to be so conscious of all these things. You explain everything. I prefer just to inspire, to suggest, not to explain.

I'm not really saying there are "terrible things" in your films, I'm just considering the implications of your choices—like the implications of having your last three films all end the same way—with an orgasmic climax in which two people are brought together in a passionate union that is somehow related to suicide and murder. In making this choice, aren't you romanticizing the price one has to pay for this absolute value? Isn't this a kind of romantic idealism that has connections with fascism since fascism also glamorizes death and sacrifice in

the name of the ideal?

That sounds terrible! (laughs) . . . No, the moral of all my films is to get to a stage of greater freedom. *¿Qué He Hecho?* is about the liberation of women, even if it takes killing. It's very dangerous to see my films with conventional morality. I have my own morality. And so do my films. If you see *Matador* through a perspective of traditional morality, it's a dangerous film because it's just a celebration of killing. *Matador* is like a legend. I don't try to be realistic, it's very abstract, so you don't feel identification with the things that are happening, but with the sensibility of this kind of romanticism. I hope that there is not this kind of fascist element in the celebration of murder. You know, murder happens. I'm not as, what should I say, as "naughty" as Patricia Highsmith. The kind of murder that horrifies me is the kind that happens in her novels—among regular people, where you agree with that murder. This is really immoral.

I think it's your tone that prevents the spectator from taking these murders seriously or from seeing them in terms of traditional morality. I know you've been widely quoted as saying you want to make films as if Franco had never existed, and I think that desire may be related to your refusal to see this potential connection between romantic love and fascism.

Perhaps I didn't fully understand what you said before about my glorification of violence.

It's not just violence, it's violence in the name of a noble sacrifice, which one can also find in Christianity. For example, Tina has an altar in which she puts the image of the Virgin next to that of Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor. . . .

The Spanish people are known to be very religious. But it's not true. What we do in general is to adapt religion for our own needs, as Tina does. She needs to lean on something because she feels very much alone. Religion is there to make her feel better, to keep her company. And the altar contains, not only things of beauty, but all of her memories that accompany her, that prevent her from feeling so lonely. This is the kind of religion she needs. For her, there's a Virgin and a Dictator, and even the toys of the young girl.

Yes, but doesn't the altar serve as the backdrop for the final reunion between Pablo and Antonio, for their Passion?

Yes, in the end they form part of the altar, they become religious figures.



LA LEY DEL DESEO

That's precisely what I mean. You glorify their kind of romantic love by turning it into a religion, by mystifying it with the same ideological trappings that helped to glorify fascism. But with lots of humor. . . . Maybe it's time to turn to another crucial institution that was glorified by Franco, the family. In one interview you noted that Wim Wenders chose a melodrama about the family (Paris, Texas) to win the hearts of American spectators.

That was just a joke. I like using the family very much.

In Spanish films, the family is typically made up of cruel mothers, absent, mythified fathers, and stunted, precocious children. And there seems to be a special Spanish version of the Oedipal narrative with a series of displacements of desire and hostility between the mother and the father. Sometimes the object of desire for the son is transferred from mother to father, as in La Ley del Deseo, but mostly there's a displacement of the hostility, usually directed at the father, onto the mother. I don't find this dynamic in any other national cinema. And this is particularly odd since patriarchal power is so strong, or at least was so strong in Spain under Franco. Is it that the father is so threatening, the son has to displace his hostility onto the mother? Why do you think there's so much hostility directed toward the mother?

I don't know. I defended the mother in *¿Qué He Hecho?* Of course, there was also a bad mother next door, but you actually find this kind of mother in Spain—the one who is so repressive to her children.

Yes, but in Matador the only evil character is

not the serial murderers, but Angel's repressive mother from Opus Dei.

Yes, I find this kind of mother very hateful, but there are several other mothers in that film. . . . I feel very close to the mother. The idea of motherhood is very important in Spain. The father was frequently absent in Spain. It's as if the mother represents the law, the police. It's very curious because in my next film project, I have two young girls kill their mother. When you kill the mother, you kill precisely everything you hate, all of those burdens that hang over you. In this film, I'm killing all of my education and all of the intolerance that is sick in Spain.

Is this matricide an act of liberation or is it suicidal?

I don't want to psychoanalyze it. It's like killing the power. In my film, this is a very typical mother from the South, like Bernarda Alba. In order to frighten her two daughters, she tells them that the world is going to be destroyed and that they will be guilty. And the two girls run away. Then the two parents, both the father and the mother, supposedly die, but the mother doesn't really die. When the two girls become women, the mother suddenly appears like a ghost in order to drive them crazy, really crazy, because she behaves like a ghost. It's very surrealistic. At the end, the two girls have a duel with their mother and then, after they kill her, they discover that she was not a ghost, that she was alive. But she was very crazy. The mother's behavior is actually more murderous than that of the girls.

It sounds fascinating. I can't think of any other national cinema that has so many matricides as the Spanish cinema. For example, in 1975, the year that Franco died, there were two major films in which matricide occurs—Furtivos and Pascual Duarte. And later in Saura's Mamá Cumples Cien Años, it's attempted again. And now your project! And, what's also strange, in Spanish films the killing of the father is only done by daughters, not by sons.

It's true. . . . Fathers are not very present in my films. I don't know why. They are not in my films. This is something I just feel. When I'm writing about relatives, I just put in mothers, but I try not to put in fathers. I avoid it. I don't know why. I guess I'm very Spanish.

I guess you treat fathers like Franco, as if they never existed. . . . What is the name of your new project?

I don't know whether I'm going to change it later, but now it's called *Distant Heels*. I remember when I was a child, it was a symbol of freedom for young girls to wear high heels, to smoke and to wear trousers. And these two girls are wearing heels all the time. After running away, the two sisters live together, and the older remembers that she couldn't sleep until the moment that she heard the sound of distant heels coming from the corridor. I also like the title because it sounds like a Western. All this happens in a desert in the South and the look is like that.

What qualities do you strive for in your mise en scène? Can you make any generalizations about that? The visual look seems quite different from film to film.

Yes, they *are* different. I'm learning at the same time that I'm shooting. I didn't go to any film school. So everything I learned, was learned while shooting. Also, I like so many different genres and want to go for very different qualities in each film. I have many different sides and want to develop them all. I'm not obsessed with style. I'd like each film to be absolutely different from the others in every possible way. This is a way of learning everything. And I don't want to get bored.

What impact has your success in Berlin and New York with La Ley had on your new projects? Has it led to any concrete proposals for the future? Any international coproductions?

For me the success merely means I can sell my films outside of Spain, and that's good for everybody. Right now I don't feel the temptation to make films outside of Spain because here I can work easier and faster and because it's the culture I know better than any other. I'm sure I'll make a film outside of Spain one day, but not now, not for the moment. Someday I would like to make a film in English, but later. Perhaps I'm lazy. But I want to keep working in this way. I want to feel very independent, and now I have to defend my independence even more than before.

NOTES

1. "Cine Español: De Lo Particular a lo Universal," *Fotogramas & Video* (April 1987), p. 7. The translation to English is mine.
2. Pauline Kael, "Manypeeplia Upsidownia," *The New Yorker* (April 20, 1987).

3. Javier Castro, "20 Años de Mercado Cinematográfico Español," *Cineinforme*, Edición Especial, No 494 (Septiembre 1986), pp. 70-71.
4. Francisco Llinas, *4 Años de Cine Español* (1983-86). Madrid: Festival Internacional de Cine de Madrid, IMAGFIC, 1987, p. 99.
5. Quoted by Peter Besas in *Behind the Spanish Lens: Spanish*

Cinema under Fascism and Democracy. Denver: Arden Press, 1985, p. 216.

6. John Hopewell, *Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema After Franco*. London: BFI, 1986, p. 239. Although Marco Ferreri is Italian, his earliest features were made in Spain and had enough influence to assure him an important place in the history of Spanish cinema.

Reviews

BLUE VELVET

Directed by David Lynch. Script: Lynch. Photography: Frederick Elmes. Editor: Duwayne Dunham. Music: Angelo Badalamenti. DeLaurentiis.

Much of the humor in David Lynch's reworked fifties crime thriller/horror/gothic film *Blue Velvet* comes from mundane statements which, when filtered by his personal vision, appear weird, but still oddly familiar, just as the opening shots of flowers against a white picket fence and a waving fireman seem filtered and unnatural, and yet commonplace. One such mundane statement comes from Jeff (Kyle MacLachlan), the film's protagonist, as he woos Sandy (Laura Dern): "Yeah . . . You're a mystery . . . I like you . . . very much." The "line," in all its banality, conflicts with Sandy's apparent obviousness. She is the perfect pretty high school senior girl, dates a football player, favors pastel sundresses, and is flattered by and responsive to the attentions of handsome college man Jeff. Dad is a local police detective and Mom helps her get ready for dates. But despite her appearance, we never learn much about what Sandy is like underneath the surface; and in the world of *Blue Velvet* what is hidden under the surface can be most fascinating—and horrifying.

It is Sandy, specifically her look, that I propose to focus on as a crucial element in the film. Many feminist theorists have argued that the woman in film never has access to the "gaze." Beginning with this assumption, Ann Kaplan is led to ask: "First, is the gaze necessarily male? . . . Could we structure things so that women own the gaze? If this were possible, would women want to own the gaze?"¹ In this case, of course, the concept of "gaze" is deployed metaphorically to refer to power, especially the power to control sexuality. Still, the act of looking within a film is frequently invoked (quite concretely) as it pertains to men looking at women and seldom the other way

around. Judith Mayne asks: "How are the relations of seeing, the relation of a person looking and a person looked at, power-bound? As film viewers, we have spent more time than we realize watching men and women look at each other, and, most emphatically, watching men watching women."² *Blue Velvet* offers a case study in how women watch men and how the relation of a person looking and a person looked at may depict formulations other than control and power (scopophilia and fetishism, as Laura Mulvey has described them³).

Blue Velvet is particularly relevant to such concerns because of its approach to all of its content. An ordinary cinematic subject (boy solves mystery and wins girl) is presented not as something natural and fulfilling, but in a dark, multileveled—we might even say twisted—way, encouraging the spectator to question his/her reactions to this standard material. It also provides striking examples of several varieties of looking. One woman, Dorothy (Isabella Rossellini), is both a victim and an appropriator of the traditionally considered "male gaze." Her opposite, the mysterious Sandy, offers an alternative type of looking. Sandy appears for the first time in the film by emerging from complete darkness. This stunning shot hints at her mysteriousness and unknowability; we don't understand where she has come or how she got there, either physically or psychically. Sandy's gaze is a critical feature of *Blue Velvet*, but to a great extent the film elides her nature, takes her participation for granted. It would be best to begin then, not with her, but with the more obvious focus of the film—the hero's activities and personality—and return later to the more complex problems that Sandy's simplicity raises.

Although Sandy's psychology is never examined, the importance of delving down to find hidden things is emphasized early in the film. At the end of the first scene the camera descends from a full shot of a front yard to a